

BOOK REVIEWS



Character reborn: A philosophy of Christian education

Pietsch, James (2018). Sydney, Australia: Acorn Press, pp. 292
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This book makes a valuable contribution to Christian education. Avoiding the all-too-familiar clichés found in some of the literature in this field, the author provides the reader with a rich tapestry of ideas and reflections, both philosophical and practical.

Who is James Pietsch? He leads Inaburra, a K-12 Christian Independent School in Bangor; an outer southern suburb of Sydney. His material, in part or whole, should have wide appeal and be obligatory reading for committed educators — whether principals, teachers, chaplains or even school board members — serving faith-based Christian schools.

In the opening chapters, the author establishes the credentials of the Christian faith for readers. He contends for a biblical theistic world view (as an alternative to an exclusively rational, scientific paradigm) in which the Bible is perceived as a 'love story' in which we are invited to become living, intelligent actors, as it moves to its denouement.

As a principal, Pietsch is very much aware of the challenges facing schools' leadership incumbents today; the challenge of operating in an increasingly complex environment of competing and sometimes conflicting voices — including Caesar's. For instance, many faith-based schools now have a mixed student body from diverse backgrounds and from a variety of non/religious belief. In this context, he asks, how do we make Jesus known? How do we challenge the dominant voices of individuality, self-fulfilment and greed? Also, given the heterogeneity of students' backgrounds, is it reasonable for faith-based schools to downplay their belief system to gain broader acceptability and traction or, by this very action, do they jettison their *raison d'être*? Accordingly, meaningful responses to these 'puzzles' require re-imagining of what it means

to be the Christian school community in the 21st century.

In his quest for Christian schools to make Jesus known, Pietsch puts forward the notion of education as *becoming*. He sees this as life-long learning; a holistic education that focuses on New Testament, kingdom values and the development of a virtuous moral character and also a *learning character* consisting of the author's proposed four Rs: resilience, resourcefulness, reflectiveness and reciprocity.

He disparages education as transmission, and schools as ATAR factories. Instead, his assertion is that the symbiotic relationship between teaching and learning is manifested ideally in collaborative, creative, dialogical, meaning-making activities — a multi-directional interplay of ideas — and a formidable challenge for teachers, given an environment of mandated topics in set time periods.

With a passion for mathematics, Pietsch laments that few things have changed in today's typical maths classroom, except the use of new technologies. Not only does he provide many practical suggestions as to the 'whys and hows' of learning and teaching mathematics (evoking 'images' of Eddie Woo, perhaps?), but in referring to paradoxes, logic, levels of certainty, chaos and order, he draws interesting analogies between mathematics and understanding Scripture. Other interesting points offered are, how changing the rules or making certain assumptions may result in different outcomes, how quadratic equations may illustrate that there is more than one answer in some life situations, or how Jesus' ethical perspective represents an inversion of the world's values. However, Pietsch makes it very clear, that there is no such 'thing' as *Christian mathematics*, only Christian teachers of the subject.

Observations and discussion are not confined to one curriculum subject. Attention is given to the creative and performing arts, the sciences, as well as to physical education and sport. Regarding the latter, discussion and reflection focuses on some myths and realities about character (de)formation and building and the desire to win at all costs — "whatever it takes" — perhaps conjuring up images in readers' minds of Lance Armstrong, Mike Tyson and the Essendon Bombers in contrast to the Fijian Rugby Sevens' bursting into songs of praise to God on-field, on winning the gold medal.

Surprisingly, to some, Pietsch does not argue specifically for teaching as a ministry or vocation,

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preferring to regard it as a profession. Also, Scripture classes per se in which propositional truths are covered are not perceived as forming a part of students' overall study program. Rather he opts for *participatory truths* — classrooms where teaching not only has a knowledge basis but, perhaps more importantly, a *relational* one. This understanding, of course, has been central to aboriginal culture for thousands of years in teaching each new generation, but has largely been lost in the developed world because the industrial revolution 'ushered in' a mass education model.

Pietsch expects teachers in Christian schools to demonstrate such character virtues as justice, compassion, grace and intellectual humility rather than superiority. This represents an indirect *vis a vis* a direct 'enfaithing' approach; an emphasis on 'walking' the Christian faith journey, over and above 'talking' it. Further strengthening of this *modus operandi* is provided by student service projects, thereby engaging in bringing healing to a broken and hurting world. Propositional truth on its own, according to the author, does not transform character; Jesus' narrative of The Good Samaritan being a case in point.

In traversing the educational landscape the author variously calls on luminaries or theorists in education, psychology, art, music, philosophy, mathematics, film and theology to support his claims and reasoning. This speaks of his openness to ideas and willingness to extend boundaries for Christian conservatives. Moreover, in being open, he endeavours to reach a wider audience — beyond adherents of Christianity.

With this book Pietsch stretches Christian educators' minds to be dissatisfied with the status quo and simultaneously reinvigorates them to lead purpose driven school communities who will facilitate the work of the Spirit and provide students with opportunities to choose Jesus as Lord, Saviour and friend. **TEACH**

Developing tenacity: Teaching learners how to persevere in the face of difficulty

Lucas, B., & Spencer, E. (2018).
Bancyfelin, United Kingdom: Crown House.
pp. 200
ISBN-13: 978-1785833038

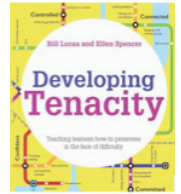
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Nelson Mandela said: "Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to change the world". Education, however, is not only about passing on skills and knowledge but also about developing character or, as the authors of *Developing Tenacity*, put it: developing capabilities or dispositions that will aid the learner not only at school but all through life.

Lucas and Spencer note that a social science experiment carried out by Mischel at Stanford University in the 1960's sparked interest in the role that character development plays in education as well as in life success. Young children were given a choice between eating a marshmallow immediately and receiving two treats if they could wait for 15 minutes. Follow-up studies indicated that the children able to delay gratification did better in many areas of life than those who ate the marshmallow immediately. These intriguing results gave impetus to a new direction in education research: could 'habits of mind' or 'dispositions' be important in the achievement of academic success?

The research suggests that this is indeed the case and *Developing Tenacity* takes as its starting point the work of Carol Dweck and her colleagues in 2014. They studied aspects of student motivation (self-regulation strategies and mindset) and identified a number of non-cognitive factors important in the achievement of academic success. The label they gave these non-cognitive factors was *tenacity*, defined as the ability to 'work hard and to work smart for a long time.' Lucas and Spencer have broadened the scope of this concept beyond purely academic parameters and have described tenacity as encompassing



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Reflections, Impressions & Experiences

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qualities such as resilience, perseverance, grit and self-control. Simply stated it refers to the tendency to look beyond short-term-goals and rewards to longer-term achievements.

Developing Tenacity establishes a sound foundation for cultivating this important capability in the classroom. The concept of tenacity is thoroughly explored, the habits of tenacious students are clearly laid out and the case for the importance of this disposition, based upon sound psychological research, is convincingly argued.

Signature pedagogies, or learning methods most suited to achieving particular outcomes, are set out in detail with the purpose of giving the teacher clear guidelines for the development of tenacious learners. This book is rich in practical detail built upon a strong theoretical foundation. It divides the four core aspects of tenacity (being connected, confident, controlled and committed) into twelve sub-habits and then suggests a core approach and starter ideas for each of these habits.

The chapter titled “Getting Going” is particularly useful. It offers many good ideas for creative ways to promote the development of tenacity in the classroom. The Appendix tabulates these starter activities for teaching the twelve sub-habits of tenacity, for ease of access. Everything is laid out clearly.

Developing Tenacity looks beyond the classroom at ways of encouraging parents to engage with the idea of tenacity, as well as professional development and leadership training ideas to promoting the concept amongst staff.

This book also explores the potential of extra-curricular activities to develop resilience and character, and explores the positive relationship between these activities and academic success.

The largest section of *Developing Tenacity* is devoted to describing case studies and ‘promising practices’ in schools in the United Kingdom and America. Various implementations of signature pedagogies, focusing on teaching dispositions such as tenacity, are presented and make for fascinating and inspiring reading.

The second last chapter in the book gives four broad approaches to assessing tenacity as well as suggestions for tracking the progress of the development of this habit of mind. Finally, the authors outline the challenges faced by real teachers in the busy world of school and the objections that might surface when the idea of teaching a concept such as tenacity is put forward. Lucas and Spenser provide some model answers, which may be offered as counter arguments should objections be raised.

I found this book engaging and psychologically sound. Its basic premise that the emotional or non-cognitive development of the student is crucial to his or her success is well supported. The concepts are interesting and the research upon which they are based is integrated in a seamless way. This book provides compelling evidence that tenacity is an essential component of character development and will be of great value to educators who want to engage their students in a life-long process of learning. [TEACH](#)